All Saints Day traditions • When a child dies
Navigating holidays after the death of a loved one
Monks’ casket-making business reflects spirituality
WASHINGTON — Trappist and Benedictine monks in the United States support their lifestyle predominantly by selling homemade products such as preserves, fruitcake, beer, candy and, in some cases, wooden caskets.

Although caskets do not seem to fit with the traditional homemade food and drinks, the monks who make them say the ministry reflects to their spiritual understanding of simplicity in life and death and the belief that at the end of life, the body is returned to the earth, but the soul endures.

Most monks have been burying their brother monks in caskets they make for decades, but since the 1990s, a few U.S. monasteries started approaching this work as a possible business venture. Casket prices typically range from $1,100 to $2,500.

The New Melleray Abbey in Peosta, Iowa, describes the casket business its monks have been operating since 1999 as an extension of their sacred work.

“Our philosophy calls for us to labor quietly with our hands in support of our life of simplicity. We bring old world craftsmanship and sensible prices to fine wooden caskets,” it says on the website trappistcaskets.com.

The monks also stress their commitment to responsible stewardship, stating that they only use wood of local origin — much of it coming from their own 1,200-acre forest — and they plant a tree in honor of each person buried in one of their caskets.

They view casket making as part of the corporal work of mercy to bury the dead; they also bless each casket.

Benedictine monks of St. Meinrad Archabbey in St. Meinrad, Ind., have also been selling wooden caskets since 1999. On their website, abbeycaskets.com, the monks say their steady casket sale business shows “a surge of interest in spirituality and in monasticism” in the United States.

“We see an increasing desire from those outside the monastery to connect with the monastic community in a variety of forms. One form of this desire has surfaced in a request for and a positive response to a casket modeled after the traditional monastic casket,” the site states.

The monks advertise that the caskets enable others to share with the monks their “belief in the Christian’s ultimate poverty before God. ... What more powerful symbol to express this kinship than a casket? What more solemn occasion than death?”

Although funeral homes sell caskets, they also allow families to supply their own. In 1994, the Federal Trade Commission ruled that funeral homes may not charge a surcharge or handling fee to those who wish to
Chaplains help military families cope with loss

By Felix Rivera
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Military chaplains not only help soldiers handle loss, they also make sure these men and women can continue their duties in the midst of tragedies.

Father Redmond Raux, a priest of the Archdiocese of Boston who is a chaplain with the Air Force, said his job is to make sure the troops are mission ready at all times, especially after a loss.

“It is my job to make sure they know they did everything they were trained to do,” he said. “It helps to facilitate a faster return to normality.”

“Military chaplains get to engage with the airman in the workplace, be a part of the system,” he said. “We can minister from within.”

Even so, Father Raux said that chaplains provide much of the same services as those on the “outside”: rites, religious education, funeral services, marriage and more.

The priest, a lieutenant colonel, noted the accessibility chaplains have in their ministry as one major difference.

In fact, Father Raux, who was ordained as a priest in 1982, said he made an effort to avoid being a strange face to the troops and to build spiritual relationships.

“It is important that chaplains realize these folks are not just a number,” he said.

He remembered one story in particular where he ministered to a young woman who had just learned about the loss of her grandmother and, because of strict rules concerning emergency leave during deployment, could not return home for the funeral.

Father Raux was able to talk to her about the grieving process and about her faith, even though she was not Catholic.

“It is a matter of just passing someone in the hallway and being able to talk to them freely about what is going on,” he said.

Father Kieran Mandato, a chaplain for the Washington Naval District, has had a very different set of experiences.

Father Mandato, a priest of the New York Archdiocese who has been on active duty with the Navy since 1992, presides over burials at Arlington National Cemetery for the Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard.

He follows what he calls his “regimen” for notifying families about a loss.

After receiving a notification about a death, he sends a letter to each family, followed up by a phone call.

“Many times, these phone calls turn into opportunities for me to listen to the grieving families,” said the priest, who holds the rank of commander. “It allows me to have a ministry of presence for them, even on the telephone.”

Many times, when families come in to speak with Father Mandato face-to-face, he notices their expressions and the hurt they feel. Often, this grief is expressed during the burial.

“Sometimes the grief has dissipated, and other times it has resurfaced because families are finally able to pay tribute to their loved ones,” he said.

Father Mandato shared a story about a burial he described as “touching.”

During his usual phone call to the family, the wife of a deceased Marine Corps general read a part of the will.

“In that will,” the priest said, “he had requested not to have any of the Marines do any honors for him because they had been doing exactly that for the last 30 plus years,” the amount of time the general had served in the Marines.

“This was a beautiful burial because of the general’s humility,” he said. “It was in the pouring rain, no less.”

He also recalled instances where he would preside at the burial of one spouse, only to be at the burial of the other spouse a few months later.

Father Mandato called the military burial process a “ministry unto itself.”

MONKS: Work to keep casket-making business

From Page 2B

supply their own casket for funeral arrangements.

In Louisiana, state law allows only licensed funeral homes to sell caskets to the public, and this has had an impact on the casket-making business of the Benedictine monks of St. Joseph Abbey in Covington who launched their casket business in 2007.

In the summer of 2010, the monks filed a lawsuit in a federal court in New Orleans to sell the caskets within the state.

In the suit, Benedictine Abbot Justin Brown said the monks simply want to “be able to construct, craft and build simple wooden coffins to sell to our friends, associates and the general public. We are not a wealthy monastery, and we were hoping that the income we could generate from the sale of these coffins would help us meet the educational and the health care needs of our monks.”

The monks at New Melleray Abbey in Iowa have not faced these hurdles and as a result they have seen their business grow. Five years ago they received local zoning approval to build a new woodworking facility at the abbey, enabling them to produce 2,500 to 3,000 caskets a year.

Sam Mulgrew, the operations general manager for Trappist Caskets, said the monks were not looking to make more than 3,000 caskets a year.

“They’re not doing this for wealth,” he told the Northwest Indiana Catholic, newspaper of the Diocese of Gary, Ind., after the expansion was announced.

“This is to pay bills and take care of the monks’ charities.”

A Navy chaplain stands at a safe distance as an F-14 Tomcat prepares to take off from the USS Harry S. Truman flight deck while supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom. Chaplains serve in three branches of the military. Navy chaplains also serve Marine and Coast Guard units. CNS photo by Ryan O’Connor | U.S. Navy

All Saints’ Day Service

Monday, Nov. 1
10:00 a.m.

Service conducted by Rev. Vincentius Alexius S.V.D. of St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Church

Silk flowers available in the cemetery office

Rosalawn Memorial Park
225-344-0186 • 4045 North St., Baton Rouge, LA
All Saints Day customs in the Diocese of Baton Rouge

By Barbara Chenevert
Staff Writer

Tombstones are freshly washed. Yellow, bronze and white mums line rows of grave markers. Cemetery maintenance crews are cutting grass and trimming hedges. The Catholic Church is about to embark on the “Days of the Dead,” a time set aside to remember and honor the dead and to look forward to the day the living will join them in the Communion of Saints.

In heavily Catholic south Louisiana, the feasts of All Saints and All Souls are important days filled with customs and rituals that reflect the Catholic belief in resurrection and bring solace to those mourning the loss of loved ones. Graves are blessed, candles are lit and prayers are said for the living and the dead.

“We call people to trust in Christ and the resurrection,” said Father Phil Spano, pastor of Ascension of Our Lord Church in Donaldsonville and St Francis of Assisi in Smoke Bend. These observances “can be comforting and sad at the same time, especially if the death is recent,” he said.

Traditions in the Diocese of Baton Rouge steeped in history, building on earlier days when life expectancies were shorter and people observed lengthy periods of mourning in which mirrors were draped in black, black wreaths hung on doors and family members dressed in mourning garb. The feasts of All Souls, All Saints, and the day before – All Hallow’s Eve (Halloween) – became among the most celebrated of holy days. They were social occasions as much as religious ones, providing a time to gather, remember, mourn and celebrate.

Pam Fose of Our Lady of Peace Church in Vacherie recalls that her great-grandmother and her two daughters, Fose’s grandmother’s sisters, would travel to Vacherie from Jefferson Parish prior to the All Saints Day feast. “When they would arrive, we, as children, would run out to meet the car because it was laden with goodies: fresh bananas and fruit and boxes of McKenzie’s donuts. What a treat,” she said.

In the trunk were spools of wire, thread, ribbon and tools to make flower bouquets for the graves. And the car interior was loaded with fresh flowers. “The car was also packed with trick-or-treat candy because they were always here for Halloween. I think everyone in Vacherie came to my grandmother’s house for Halloween because she always had lots of candy for the kids. For the grown-ups, there were fresh popcorn balls and the most delicious fudge and candies you would ever want to eat. Halloween was a happy evening and the house was filled with visitors, joy and laughter. But early the next morning, the tone would change to serious and somber as these ladies filled the cars, sometimes making two or three trips, to take their finished florals to the cemetery. By the afternoon, they could be found in their lawn chairs beside the graves of their loves ones, praying the rosary and waiting for the gonging of the church bell to let them know that the priest was on his way to bless the graves once again.”

Those elaborate customs have given way to simpler, more modern observances, but Fose said the feast is still a major one in Vacherie. Preparations began in early October with people cleaning and painting graves, she said. On Oct. 31, families with loved ones buried in the cemetery will pick up small bottles of holy water and walk through the cemetery blessing the graves. Later they will stand beside a loved one’s grave as Pastor Father Michael Miceli blesses the graves as well. “The season is a wonderful time of visiting, and on All Saints Day residents get to see family and friends they have not seen in a while. People in Vacherie take

Faith sustains grieving parents

By Laura Deavers
Editor

Death changes the normal aspects of life because of the hole, the void created by the absence of the person who died. The magnitude of the absence, the size of the hole, depends on the relationship you had with the person who died.

When a child dies, whether unexpectedly as in an accident or after a protracted illness, the grief that comes can be overwhelming because we do not think about children dying. Society trains us to think that people die only after they have lived a long, full life.

Mothers and fathers who have had a child die talk about faith holding them together when everything else seems to be falling apart. “If it is this hard with faith, how hard must it be without faith,” said Johnnette S. Benkovic, producer and host of “The Abundant Life,” which is on EWTN.

Benkovic’s son died in a truck accident when he was 25, three months after his safe return from military service in Iraq.

“Faith sustains us,” she said. “Faith, hope and love are gifts from God. We have to be open to them.”

Gregory Floyd, author of “A Grief Unveiled,” talked about his youngest son, John, who was killed in an automobile accident. In his book, Floyd grapples with his belief in a loving God who could allow the pain that comes from grieving the death of a son.

Benkovic said she felt like God had given her a protective coating to be able to deal with the pain of her son’s death in 2004 and her husband’s death in 2007 from cancer.

Benkovic and Floyd both spoke of their belief in resurrection and life after death, which helped them through the immeasurable pain they experienced.

They said they believe that when a person dies, that life moves to another reality, which is with God.

“We reminded ourselves that this is not the end, we will see (our son) again,” said Floyd.

As they talked of the intense pain they each went through at the death of their sons, Floyd said, “I would suffer the pain forever if it means salvation for my child.” Benkovic added, “Redemptive suffering can be used for someone who is suffering more.”

“We never connect the truth about death – there

LIVING WITH LOSS

October 20, 2010
CUSTOMS: All Saints’ Day customs are as various as Catholic dioceses worldwide

FROM PAGE 4B

a lot of pride in their cemetery,” Palse said.

“Everybody from young to old gets involved” in the communities of French Settlement and Maurepas, said Father Jason Palermo, pastor of the cluster of St. Joseph and St. Stephen the Martyr churches, which has nine cemeteries. “Whole families come out for the Blessing of Graves. Afterwards many families get together for dinner in their homes,” he added. “They are cognizant of remembering and honoring the dead. People here tend to stay in the community. They live on family land and they maintain their cemeteries,” he said. “They consider it a major responsibility.” St. Michael’s Church in Convent teams up with the Poche House on River Road to host a program that brings together the past and present. In its “Gone but Not Forgotten” performances, actors, musicians and singers don costumes to become characters from earlier days. They tell the stories of people who are buried in the cemetery or who are part of Louisiana history, said Connie Donadio, one of the coordinators of the event. “It is important to keep our history alive,” she said.

The tour, which will be held on Oct. 30, includes the re-creation of a wake with a character reciting the rosary in French, music from the 1890s organ in St. Michael Church and a cemetery visit where “spirits” tell their stories. After the performances, people are invited to lunch in the church hall. Proceeds from the event benefit the church cemetery.

In Donaldsonville, All Saints Day is “a social time when people gather,” Father Spano said. Families who don’t live in Donaldsonville come in for the Blessing of Graves, which can bring comfort because “we ask them to focus on the fact that everything is about the pastoral mystery of Jesus: death and resurrection,” he said.

A longtime tradition at St. George Church in Baton Rouge is the placement of luminaries on each grave in its cemetery, a sign of hope in resurrection of the body and soul. After a prayer service and blessing of the graves, people gather to share stories and refreshments in the cemetery.

For churches that have no cemetery, other traditions honor the dead. At St. Jean Vianney Church in Baton Rouge, parishioners who died during the year are remembered with crosses bearing their names which are displayed in the church all year. At an evening Mass on All Saints Day, the crosses are presented to families of the deceased. A member from each family is also asked to walk in a procession during the intercessory prayers, when they will light a candle from the Easter candle and place it near the altar table, Lori Acouin of St. Jean Vianney said.

St. Thomas More Church in Baton Rouge presents a lit candle to families of those who have died in the previous year. The candle “fills them with light and hope and a spirit of their loved ones,” said JoAnn Weber, head of the church’s bereavement committee. They are encouraged to light the candle during the upcoming holidays, she said. After Mass, the congregation is invited to a time of fellowship, because all have memories of loved ones, Weber said. Everyone has experienced loss and this is a good time for community, she said.

There are secular observances of the feast also. One of the largest in this area is at St. Joseph Plantation in Vacherie, which holds a “Mourning Tour” through Nov. 2 that showcases the deep mourning rituals of 19th-century Creole Louisiana.

### Blessing of Graves

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albany</td>
<td>Oct. 31</td>
<td>3:00 p.m.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amite</td>
<td>Oct. 31</td>
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<td>Amite Memorial Gardens</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amite Cemetery</td>
<td>Oct. 31</td>
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<td>Amite Cemetery No. 2</td>
<td>Oct. 31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baker</td>
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<td>Hillcrest</td>
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<td>St. Isidore</td>
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<tr>
<td>Batou Rouge</td>
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<td>Greensoaks</td>
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<td>Roselawn</td>
<td>Nov. 1</td>
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<td>St. Joseph</td>
<td>Nov. 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Highland</td>
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<td>St. George</td>
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<td>Bayou Goulia</td>
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<td>Bayou Sorrel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indian Mound</td>
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<td>St. Martin</td>
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<td>Convent</td>
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<td>Denham Springs</td>
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<td>Old/New Red Oak</td>
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<td>French Settlement Community</td>
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<td>St. Joseph</td>
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<td>Head of Island</td>
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<td>Our Lady of Perpetual Help</td>
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<td>Innis</td>
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<td>Jarreau</td>
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<td>Chenal</td>
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All Saints’ Day OUTDOOR MASS

It’s a day for friends and family, and a time to reflect on the lives of those we love... and a beautiful way to celebrate the memory of those most dear to us.

Mon., Nov. 1 at 10:00 am

Celebrate: Father Jerry Martin of St. Patrick Catholic Church

See the special reproduction of Michelangelo’s “The Pieta” at Resthaven.

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www.resthavenbatonrouge.com
Navigating holidays after the death of a loved one

By Adeshina Emmanuel
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON – When most people think of holidays and special occasions, they envision themselves among family and friends. But what happens when someone is faced with spending a holiday without a loved one who has died?

“Sometimes people feel like they’re going crazy. Their grief intensifies during the holidays and sometimes that catches people off guard,” said Kayla Waldschmidt, bereavement coordinator for the Horizon Resources Grief Center, a program within Horizon Homecare and Hospice in Brown Deer, Wis.

Waldschmidt said some people cling tightly to holiday traditions, while others feel like they don’t want to celebrate at all.

Although depression is normal, staying in bed all day and trying to sleep it away can be a bad idea, she said.

“It gets worse. Feelings of loneliness and sadness can intensify,” she said. “You don’t want to isolate yourself, and you don’t want to try to ignore the fact that you’re hurting.”

Going out of town on vacation or doing something completely different than usual are options, Waldschmidt said.

People shouldn’t act as though coming to terms with the absence of a loved one isn’t painful. They should discuss “what everybody needs to get through this holiday and what I should do,” she added.

She recommended finding a way to memorialize the person who died or finding a helpful or healing ritual.

Examples of ways to memorialize a lost loved one at the holidays include leaving an empty chair at the dinner table in honor of him or her, writing down memories, visiting the loved one’s grave or having a Mass celebrated in that person’s honor.

Adults can help children through special occasions without loved ones by having a family discussion about important aspects of holidays, what traditions they like best and how they want to honor the departed.

Ingrid Seunarine, director of bereavement services for the Diocese of Brooklyn, N.Y., knows firsthand how difficult it can be coping with a loved one’s death on a holiday. Her mother died on Thanksgiving 15 years ago, and five years ago her father died on Christmas Day.

Seunarine said there’s no right or wrong way to handle grief during the holidays.

“Some people aren’t able to celebrate at all. On the other hand, some people will say they have to continue tradition,” she said.

“It’s important for the bereaved to understand that coming to terms with grief takes time, Seunarine said, stressing that one can’t hurry the process.

“You can’t get from here to there without experiencing the pain. It will get better eventually, but everybody grieves at their own pace,” she said, adding that the bereaved should not feel guilty for having a good time during a holiday or special occasion.

“Don’t feel bad if you’re having a good day and you are smiling. It’s OK; you can’t be sad 24/7,” Seunarine said.

Mercy Sister Marie Michele, a counselor and national speaker on family life topics, has compiled a list of suggestions for people coping with the death of a loved one during a holiday or special occasion, which includes the following advice:

- Be prepared with a response when people ask what they can do to help.
- Share stories about your loved one.
- Re-evaluate old traditions and family rituals and determine what should still be observed and what might change.
- Plan something to look forward to after the holidays.
- Find opportunities for support.
- And lastly, count your blessings by making a list.

Catholic grief ministries provide needed support

By Jessica Pall
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON – Although people often feel alone after the death of a loved one, they can find support from parishioners who help coordinate funeral Masses and pare bereavement groups that suggest coping skills.

One of the ways some parish ministers to the bereaved is through the Arimathean ministry, which prepares and coordinates funeral Masses.

The ministry derives its name from St. Joseph of Arimathea, who, according to all four Gospels, asked Pontius Pilate for the body of the crucified Christ to give him a proper burial in a tomb the saint donated.

Jack Costello directs the Arimathean Society at Holy Redeemer Church in the Washington suburb of Kensington, Md. “It is one of the seven virtues to bury the dead,” Costello said.

The duties of the Arimatheans include setting out vessels and bread and wine, lighting altar candles, as well as serving as lectors, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, altar servers, ushers and greeters for the funeral Mass.

At Holy Redeemer the society includes 15 parishioners, all retirees, who find their volunteer service rewarding, Costello said. No volunteer helps with more than three funerals a year and usually three members are needed for a service.

“Although families may not see the direct benefit of our work,” Costello said, “it is virtually impossible for the pastor to run the service without us.”

Patricia McConville runs a six-week bereavement program co-sponsored by two Melrose, Mass., parishes: St. Mary’s of the Annunciation and Incarnation of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, where she has been involved for many years.

In the program, McConville and a facilitator discuss different topics and encourage attendees to participate or remain quiet if they prefer. After the sessions end, participants often try to keep in touch with one another to continue the healing process.

“The main thing is to create a safe, confidential space for them to be together and share whatever is in their hearts,” McConville said in an e-mail.

She said the ministry is important because “people often feel so isolated, confused, abandoned and desperate after they lose someone.”

“The only way to heal is to walk through grief, but it doesn’t have to be a solitary journey. In Scripture they see that Jesus himself experienced what they are going through. At this most critical time in their lives, our church is there to comfort, not judge,” McConville added.

The bereavement program teaches coping skills that can help the grievers in the short term and long term. Grievers learn to accept themselves, deal more calmly with family, have realistic expectations for themselves and others, and find ways to honor and remember their loved ones.

People benefit from the ministry, according to McConville, because they begin to understand that they are experiencing are normal.

At the national level is the National Catholic Ministry to the Bereaved, a faith-based ministry established in 1990 to provide grief support to individual churches.

The organization offers educational classes for bereavement ministers and sells support resources including books, brochures and pamphlets for both griever and ministers. All types of grief are dealt with, including death, job loss, divorce and even the death of a beloved pet.
Discussing death with loved ones eases burden, says author

By Nancy Frazier O'Brien Catholic News Service

In the days immediately before and after a loved one dies, time may slow to a crawl or pass in a flash. But how can people be sure to do or say the things they want to in that critical time period?

"Practically speaking, you need to pull a support system together," says Sherri Auger, an elder-care planning consultant who co-wrote “Now What? A Practical Guide to Dealing with Aging, Illness and Dying” (Novalis, 2010) with health journalist Barbara Wickens. Even better, if the death is not sudden, you can help your loved one to plan ahead so that his or her wishes for end-of-life care and a final remembrance can be carried out easily.

“It takes a huge burden off the family if they know they have done what you want them to do," she said.

Auger, an only child, found out the importance of such planning 10 years ago when her father became ill. His illness took its toll three weeks later. Auger then had to plan on her mother, who also became ill and died two weeks after her father's death. He had been a prisoner of diabetes and kidney disease, and his death at age 80 took as much out of Auger as it did his family.

She now teaches on the subject in the Toronto area and heads Caring Matters, which helps individual clients with elder-care and estate planning.

Starting a discussion about end-of-life care and funeral arrangements with elderly parents is difficult and doesn’t get easier as parents get older, Auger acknowledges. She said adult children approaching middle age should make out their own wills and put their funeral plans in writing, then raise the topic with their parents.

Here is some of Auger's best advice for the time when a loved one is dying and the period immediately afterward:

“The center of attention always has to be on the person passing away,” she said. Those in the room with a dying person must remember that “the last sense that people lose is the sense of hearing” and must give one another “space and respect,” acknowledging that not everyone wants to be in the room at a death and trying not to “put their own feelings on other people.”

– As a person begins transitioning into death, he or she might “need to be given permission to pass away,” Auger said. Hand-holding and applying hand cream can be very welcome, but it is important to know too that some people might find it uncomfortable to be touched as the end nears.

– Keep practical considerations in mind, such as the fact that dying persons might not be wearing their dentures and could find it difficult to speak. “You cannot expect them to say their dying words to you,” Auger said. “Don’t leave what you want to say until the very end. Have the words you want to have with them before it reaches that stage.”

– Last rites or a final blessing from a priest or other religious leader can ease the transition to death, she added.

– Once death has occurred, “you don’t have to rush away.” Instead, Auger recommended that people “take whatever time they need to be with the person.” She also recommended that after a grieving person returns home he or she should “mark that moment in some special way, with something pleasant,” such as a hot bath.

– In looking for support through the grieving process, she advised people to consult the many resources available through churches and hospice programs. Ask friends and family members for help, especially with tasks that match well with their expertise. But be aware that the people closest to you might not be able to help “because they are grieving too,” she added.

– On a practical note, she advised next of kin to make sure to keep a copy of the deceased's will and to ask someone to stay at the house during the funeral.

MINISTRIES: Support offered for families

Currently, the organization has more than 300 members from all across the U.S. and from Guam, Ireland, Canada and elsewhere. The ministry is based in St. Louis. Its website, www.griefwork.org, offers information on membership and its various resources.

“We feel this is a very important ministry,” said staffer Georgia Zarbo, noting that the organization was created following a survey conducted by the U.S. bishops that "identified what supplemental support parishes wanted for their ministries" and is focused on identifying how it “can help them bring comfort and meaning” to those who are experiencing loss.
WASHINGTON – For many young children, it’s hard enough learning arithmetic and proper grammar. But grappling with grief after losing a loved one is in a whole other realm of difficulty.

Laurie Olbrisch, executive vice president of Rainbows, an international grief-support charity, said grieving children often experience low self-esteem and a sense of vulnerability that can impede their social and emotional development if left unchecked.

She said these feelings can put children at higher risk for developing patterns of risky behavior, such as drug abuse and promiscuity.

“Maybe they’re only in third grade when the loss happens, but if they’ve never had any support or help … maybe by the time they’re a teenager those things will really manifest themselves in their personality,” Olbrisch said.

She noted that children are sometimes uncomfortable talking to counselors or psychologists about their grief.

That’s when a peer-based approach is better for helping them cope, Olbrisch said, because they get to “talk about their loss in their own terms, on their own level.”

Hospice Support Care is a volunteer organization in Virginia that provides various services to seriously ill people and people suffering the loss of a loved one.

Once a year, in spring, the organization hosts Camp Rainbow, a weekend bereavement camp for children ages 5 to 12. The camp aims to strike a balance between recreation and grief-specific activities. Campers play games and participate in outdoor activities, like fishing and hiking, but they also take part in group discussions where they can share stories and express their feelings.

Kim Rudat, Hospice Support Care’s children’s bereavement coordinator, said the camps reduce children’s sense of isolation and give them an environment where they can help each other cope with grief.

“They learn from other kids their age experiencing the same feelings and thoughts,” Rudat said. “The big thing is they learn they aren’t alone. They aren’t the only ones who don’t have a parent.”

Hospice Support Care staff determines if children are ready to come to the camp during an intake process where they get to know each child. Rudat said she doesn’t recommend someone attends until two or three months after a loved one’s death, because some children are too numb to deal with their feelings, or too overwhelmed to address them in a group setting, immediately after their loss.

The Rev. Lavender Kelley, a pediatric chaplain for Children’s Memorial Hospital in Chicago, spends much of her time helping children through various forms of grief, including the loss of loved ones.

She explained the different ways young children up to age 12 try to comprehend death.

Infants don’t experience the same sense of loss that an older child might because their minds are so underdeveloped, Rev. Kelley said.

And while children between ages 2 and 5 are aware of their loss, they sometimes struggle to grasp concepts such as time and forever, so it can be hard for them to understand death as a permanent state, Rev. Kelley said. It’s important to be somewhat frank when explaining this, however hard that might be.

Being vague or using metaphors to explain death runs the risk that children will indulge in fantasy and obsess over something that will never change rather than addressing their feelings, Rev. Kelley said.

“You want to use very concrete language. Don’t say things like, ‘They’re gone.’ You use terms like ‘death’ and ‘dead,’ and not analogies like, ‘vacation’ or ‘sleep,’” the chaplain said. “They’re going to try to figure out how to make (their loved one) come back. Or they’ll start to think that any kind of illness or any kind of accident is going to cause the same thing.”

When helping children through their grief, it’s important to listen and let them ask questions. For example, a 5-year-old asking if he or she will get a new sibling after losing a brother or sister might sound bizarre, but it’s not out of the ordinary for a young child who is grappling with the concept of death, Rev. Kelley said.

Prior to the loss of a family member, for many children death has only come up when it pertained to pets or plants.

“The absolute worst thing you can say to a kid is, ‘You don’t need to think about that,’ or, ‘Don’t ask questions like that.’ Because they’re going to think about it even more. And it’s going to turn into this cycle of unanswered questions that turn into fears that mount,” she said.


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“Grief is the price I must pay for loving,” said Floyd. “I told the children that their brother is probably going to die. Let’s draw together and have prayer time. They could touch him and kiss him. You can whisper in his ear anything you want to tell him before you leave.’ I encouraged them to ask him for forgiveness for anything they need forgiveness for what they did or didn’t do and to tell him they forgive him also.”

Floyd said this made a big difference for his children in how they accepted their brother’s death.

Benkovc said she draws strength from the Blessed Mother as she reflects on what Mary went through when Jesus, her crucified son, was taken down from the cross and placed in her arms.

“Grief is the price I must pay for loving,” said Floyd. A price he is willing to pay.